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ABSTRACT

The composing processes of four freshmen writers of varying proficiency who had been taught problem-solving strategies for one semester were traced to see whether they would differ in how they set up and followed through with strategic options. Each of the four students produced a think-aloud protocol as he or she planned and wrote an assignment related to the word "paradigm" and its use in discourse communities. Excerpts of students' protocols showed how students elaborated the problem--or impasse--and the specificity with which they elaborated their options. Results indicated that the two "good" writers isolated many more points of conflict than the other two writers, one by calling upon class instruction and the other by making use of strategies apparently brought with her from high school. The two "less proficient" writers isolated far fewer problems and were unable to render the strategies they needed to negotiate the points of conflict they did isolate. Findings suggest that teachers should focus on student writers as they face the point of impasse and provide carefully developed instruction to help students: (1) assess whether their tried-and-true approaches are falling short; (2) help students envision their own strategic options; and (3) make strategic decisions, including those that require taking risks. (Four tables of data are included and 15 references are attached.) (SR)

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# From the Classroom to the Dorm:

# Facing the Impasse of Demanding Discourse Constraints

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# From the Classroom to the Dorm:
# Facing the Impasse of Demanding Discourse Constraints

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We in the field of rhetoric and composition have inherited a familiar problem, one that McCarthy (1987) depicts vividly in "Strangers in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum." David, the student in McCarthy's case study, learns how to build a thesis and how to provide textual support in his freshman composition course--tasks often considered "basic" to literate practice within the academic community. But he fails to apply what he learned to writing assignments required in subsequent poetry and biology courses. McCarthy writes: "David interpret[s . . . the three courses] as being totally different from each other and totally different from any he ha[s] ever done before" (p. 245). David, here, is a real enigma--a mystery we've all encountered but have been unable to account for with much satisfaction. The primary question is: how do we interpret what's going on for David and other students like him?

Three metaphors are readily available for us to carry out some sort of interpretation: *Transfer*, *Internationalization*, and *Fluency*. Let me briefly summarize:

•*Transfer*---The notion of transfer comes to us largely from earlier work in cognitive psychology in which researchers were interested in learning how problem-solvers carry knowledge across a series of isometric puzzles--tasks that are well-defined, meeting the criteria of formal logic. Such characteristics are inconsistent, however, with the ill-structured writing tasks that students frequently face.

•*Internalization*--á la Vygotsky (1962) and his Zone of Proximal Development. Researchers and teachers, such as Applebee and Langer (1983), rely on this notion to develop and test their instructional technique called "scaffolding." LeFevre (1987) uses it to justify group-centered writing instruction. While Vygotsky's idea of "internalization" provides some useful pedagogical techniques, it fails to provide a description of the

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phenomenon of being able to negotiate the constraints of increasingly demanding writing tasks. Moreover, Vygotsky developed his theory of internalization while studying children solving problems that involved manipulations and visual comparisons. There is little evidence to suggest that there is a strong enough parallel to justify the comparison between the children in Vygotsky's research and the adult writers in our college classrooms (Carey, 1985).

•*Fluency*--the notion of "fluency" emerges through the neo-romantic movement and its emphasis on process (Fulwiler, 1986). The idea behind this concept is that fluency is the primary key in preparing students for novel writing tasks. As Hillocks (1984) underscores, however, to teach expressive writing with expectations of building fluency for other types of writing tasks is to work from an assumption unsubstantiated by research.

In summary then, as Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) make clear, a great part of becoming a proficient writer comes from learning to contend with numerous demands that various rhetorical situations place on the writer. The neo-romantic emphasis on fluency through expressive writing steers clear of any explanation of how writers learn to contend with increasingly demanding, transformational constraints. Similarly, by adopting metaphors of Transfer and Internalization, we may be able to account for general trends. But we will also miss a critical dimension of what writers actually do as they, like David, move into a new community that requires new and challenging literate activity. That is, if we look at students in the process of taking on a demanding writing task, we will see something that goes beyond--or is more complex than--that which these three metaphors can account for: we will see students negotiating the point of impasse.

After a semester of teaching problem-solving strategies to a class of freshman writers, I decided to pursue an investigation that required tracing the composing processes of four students. While all four students had discussed and practiced the dozen or so strategies covered in class, and all had demonstrated varying degrees of both declarative and procedural knowledge of the strategies, the students varied in writing proficiency. Students were chosen based on their responses to a questionnaire distributed in class and on their overall performances in the course.

Two students, Henry and Lauren, were selected as "good" writers; Kirk and Scott, both having more difficulty in the class, as "less proficient" writers. All four students noted on the questionnaire that writing instruction directed at explicit strategies for problem-solving was new to them when they began the class at the beginning of the semester.

The inquiry took place during the second half of the semester while students were studying and writing analyses of "discourse communities." In preparation for a group activity with another section of the same course, students in my section had read Carol Cuhn's analysis of the discourse of nuclear physicists. Students who visited the class had read the essay, as well. In the article, Cuhn uses the term *paradigm* in several instances. As a group, students in my class had stopped to extrapolate a definition of the term from the context in which it was used; students in the other section had not. The inquiry took place a day after students from both sections had met for the group activity. I include this detail because the second class of students established a real audience and a real purpose for my writers.

The four selected students were given three sheets of source material, including passages from Thomas Kuhn's (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and a multi-dimensional puzzle depicting an interpretation of a "paradigm shift." In individual work sessions that I recorded, each subject and I reviewed the material and then read the following prompt:

> Now that you have some background in how Thomas Kuhn and others use the word *paradigm*, plan and write a presentation or a document to be given to the students in the class who visited our last session. You'll need to find a way to make the material relevant to them and their papers on discourse communities. Moreover, what you produce will be used to give closure to Unit II [the section in the curriculum that both classes were finishing up].
>
> As you work, try to <u>apply the strategies you learned in your present writing class to what you compose and how you compose it.</u> Once you're ready to begin, compose aloud; that is, as you think, talk. Don't analyze your thoughts; instead, just verbalize what is "going through your head."

The question guiding my investigation was: Will the "good" and "less proficient" writers differ in how they set up and follow through with strategic options?

The inquiry suggests that the groups of writers did indeed differ with regard to the strategic options they provided for themselves and how the writers made use of these options. In addition, the inquiry reveals that of the four students, Henry was the only writer who explicitly made use of the strategies discussed in class in order to write the assignment. The strategies he pulls from are those of problem analysis: specifically, locating the *stasis* of the problem, putting the problem in a larger context, and elaborating its parts. Let's turn to excerpts of his protocol that show this:

As with the other subjects in the inquiry, Henry had not had instruction in formal problem analysis before this writing class. Nonetheless, he drew on what he had learned concerning problem analysis to resolve a difficulty which arose while defining *paradigm*. He began by clarifying a definition for himself by recalling a class discussion:

> Like we've been saying in class, sort of, paradigms are like a mind-set. Like the group things we did. From different discourse communities, we agreed on five words. And from those we sort of discovered a common paradigm. With the military people, they came up with "chain of command." That's sort of metaphorical, but it's a way of seeing the world. And the football people. Blitz. Defense. Oh, ya, they came up with the paradigm of war. So, o.k., paradigm is a mind-set for a community at large.

The difficulty emerged when he looked up the word in the dictionary to find *paradigm* defined as *an example*. "An example? An example?! This isn't making sense. Is it the whole thing, or is it just a part, a product?" Henry seemed to panic briefly, "How can I write this if I can't even figure out a definition?" Then he stopped short: "Wait a minute; this is a problem. I can look at it. I now know how to do that." At that point, he cast his difficulty in terms of steps for problem analysis he had practiced in class. First he formulated a problem statement: "O.K., O.K., I've got to define this for people when I can't even define it for myself." Second, he placed the problem in a larger context: "People use this word all of the time, yet none of these sources agree. How can other people follow along? Communication would break down."

As Henry explicitly began what he labeled "elaborating the parts of the problem"--one of the strategic steps in problem-analysis taught in class--he explicated the various definitions of paradigm he found in the provided materials. Quickly, he identified the of problem definition as worthy of the entire presentation: "I've got it. Yes, I've got it. Sure. I'll make this--the problem --the core of the presentation. . . . Let them analyze it." Henry shifts from problem analysis for his own sake--or for his own comprehension of the problem--to problem analysis as the central rhetorical, organizing principle for the presentation which he writes.

I have provided the above description to indicate what such explicit application of course instruction might look like. But, as I mentioned before, of the four students, Henry is the only one who calls explicitly upon course instruction. It is the cases of the other three writers, especially of those that are less proficient--who we, as teachers, would hope would be benefiting most from such instruction--that merit most of our attention. First, let's get an overview of what I see as the distinguishing feature in the two groups' protocols: the problems each isolates and the options each provides for him- or herself for moving beyond these points of impasse. See Table 1 for a summary of the impasses Henry confronts and the options he identifies for himself:

Table 1

Identified Impasses and Options: Henry

| *Identified Impasses* | *Options* |
|---|---|
| Define *paradigm*: "First of all, I've got to figure out what exactly a paradigm is." | •look at puzzle<br>•provide examples<br>•look up word in dictionary |
| Make discussion of paradigm relate to discourse communities: "Ah, shoot, I haven't even thought of discourse communities yet." | •relate *paradigm* to *mindset* and the *language* that makes up the mindset to *discourse communities*<br>•provide students with steps they could actually use in their papers. |
| Figure out appropriate format: "How should this paper be written to suit a class discussion?" | •write an essay<br>•write a lesson plan<br>•write a script |
| Impasse: Can't proceed because can't determine definition: "How can I write this if I can't even figure out a definition?" | •make the problem of defining *paradigm* the point of discussion for the class script. |
| Need to find examples students would respect: "These first examples are infantile . . . might make students, well, you know, not respect these ideas." | •Jeopardy<br>•Babysitting<br>•The Presidency |

Let us now turn to Lauren. Note in the summary of her protocol the specificity with which she elaborates each problem--or impasse--and the specificity with which she articulates her options.

Table 2

Identified Impasses and Options: Lauren

| *Identified Impasses* | *Options* |
|---|---|
| Figure out what to do: "I need to explain to someone who is as confused about this as I've been." | •Use math as an example<br>•Use art assignment as example of imposed framework<br>•Use themes within *Lord Jim* as example of paradigm |
| Figure out procedure that suits her own image of *paradigm*: "I got to figure out a way to do this visually. It's just not going to happen if I do this through literature." | •Use the box as image<br>•Use dramatic production as manifestation of *paradigm* |
| Test the *play* as model for *paradigm*: "Does the play work or not? I can't go on with this if the play doesn't hold up." | •Try the *Tempest*<br>•Describe play's stage directions as rules for paradigm.<br>•Stress everyone has a different conception of a play but it has to be performed within certain parameters |
| Test whether example suits audience: "Are people going to understand this?" | •Decide whether *play* is universal enough<br>•Determine that most the people in the class are theatre majors<br>•Decide on whether to go with a play, movie, or TV show |
| Decide which play to use "What play will these people relate to best?" | •*Tempest*,<br>•*Long Day's Journey into Night*,<br>•*Don Juan*,<br>•*Romeo and Juliet* |

In summary, then, Henry and Lauren each isolate many more points of conflict than either Scott or Kirk. Henry, as just mentioned, calls upon class instruction to manage the points of difficulty; Lauren makes use of a repertoire of strategies that she apparently brought with her from high school. That is, for solving the numerous problems she encountered as she composed, the strategies learned in previous writing classes--along with the experiences she has had outside of those writing classes--proved adequate. Because they could find strategic solutions to the conflicts

they encountered as they wrote, both Henry and Lauren could keep writing until they were satisfied that the texts they produced would work effectively for the assignment's purpose.

Kirk and Scott isolated far fewer problems than Henry and Lauren and were unable, at least within the time constrains of the 90-minute protocol session, to render the strategies they needed to negotiate the points of conflict that they did isolate. Tables 3 and 4 are summaries of each of their protocols:

Table 3

Identified Impasses and Options: Kirk

| *Identified Impasses* | *Options* |
|---|---|
| Define *paradigm*:<br>"Suppose you could go with the old football words. . . . but that's not quite right. . . . We want a real paradigm." | •provide a coherent definition<br>•provide handout<br>to show two people,<br>from two discourse<br>communities,<br>talking differently<br>about the "same" thing<br>•provide examples |

Table 4

Identified Impasses and Options: Scott

| *Identified Impasses* | *Options* |
|---|---|
| Define *paradigm*:<br>"These sources don't agree, but I've got to come up with a single definition" | •combine as many sources as I can<br>•list definitions from sources<br>•quote Kuhn, "he's important in all this"<br>•provide some examples |
| Relate to discourse community:<br>"To do the assignment, I've got to relate *paradigm* to *discourse community*. | •define discourse community<br>•identify paradigm as the way of relating characteristics of a discourse community. |

In summary, then, Henry and Lauren each isolate many more points of conflict than either Scott or Kirk. Henry, as just mentioned, calls upon class instruction to manage the points of difficulty; Lauren makes use of a repertoire of strategies that she apparently brought with her from high school. That is, for solving the numerous problems she encountered as she composed, the

strategies learned in previous writing classes--along with the experiences she has had outside of those writing classes--proved adequate. Because they could find strategic solutions to the conflicts they encountered as they wrote, both Henry and Lauren could keep writing until they were satisfied that the texts they produced would work effectively for the assignment's purpose.

Kirk and Scott isolated far fewer problems than Henry and Lauren and were unable, at least within the time constrains of the 90-minute protocol session, to render the strategies they needed to negotiate the points of conflict that they did isolate. Kirk ends his writing session with words of frustration: "Where do paradigms come from? Rules come from paradigms, but where do paradigms come from? I can't figure this out, so I can't go on!" Scott decides to "combine as many sources as I can." However, the sources are in many ways irreconcilable. Rather than deciding to find a new strategy to suit the materials he is to draw upon, Scott remains determined to make his initial strategy work. Determined, that is, until twenty minutes shy of the allotted 90-minutes, he declares, "God, this is stupid. I'd just have to give the other class this list and let them figure out what sense to make of it." Such defensiveness, writes Perkins (1981) in *The Mind's Best Work*, is typical of someone determined to "maintain . . . comfortable, if less than effective, [problem-solving] habits" (p. 200). In summary, Kirk and Scott hit impasses, finally, for which they are unable to render effective strategies for overcoming.

Clearly, it is unwise to draw claims or conclusions from limited attempts to trace the processes of only four college writers. However, these students' protocols, when viewed in light of research in information-processing, especially that which deals with ill-defined problem-solving, further illuminate implications for understanding and fostering our students' strategic repertoires.

Most importantly, within the parameters of this study, this literature reinforces the very likely possibility that because of the complex nature of strategic knowledge--which Flower (1989) has identified as a vital composite of strategies, goals, and meta-awareness--students may not "internalize" strategies as coherent mental tools at all but rather disassemble each strategy, as it is described through a textbook or instruction, in order to integrate it with their own prior strategic

repertoires that they bring to the writing class (See Rose, 1983). Such integration emphasizes the possibility that the routes students travel as they enhance their strategic knowledge are intensely idiosyncratic.

Where does this inquiry take us? Foremost, it stresses that as teachers we do well to focus on student writers as they face the point of impasse. That includes providing carefully developed instruction to:

- assist students in assessing whether their tried-and-true approaches are falling short; (See the goal Scott sets to come up with single definition.)
- help students to envision their own strategic options;
- encourage students to make strategic decisions, including (and perhaps most importantly) those decisions that requiring taking risks.

Such efforts are important if our final aim is to provide instruction from which each student benefits.

It has been more than 20 years since Young, Becker, and Pike (1970) popularized the "strategies approach" to writing instruction with their textbook *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*. During the 1980s, the possibility of increasing the effectiveness of writing instruction by providing students with detailed information concerning strategies to carry out intellectually demanding tasks spurred further interest in strategy-based instruction (Pressley, Borkowski, & O'Sullivan, 1984). However, as Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986) emphasize in their overview of research in composition, there is still no "evidence available about the effect of such instruction on students' actual composing strategies" (p. 795). I contend that assessment is critical. But in order for such an assessment to be informative, we must know what we are looking for--what the process looks like through which writers enhance their strategic repertoires. To begin, we may do well to study more carefully students at the point of impasse. Then we will be in a better position to assist students, such as David--and Scott and Kirk--who up to this point may have seen most university-level writing tasks as "being totally different from each other and totally different from any [they have] ever done before."

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